

Andean Mountain Cat in Chile

Benjamin Schweinhart

February 3, 2019



Andean Mountain Cat (*Leopardus jacobita*)

In December 2018, Henry Burton and I spent a week in and around Lauca National Park, Chile. My top target was the rare and beautiful Andean Mountain Cat, and we had a list of about ten other mammals and birds that we particularly wanted to see. This brief report focuses on our search for the Andean Mountain Cat, as the details of other sites are well-covered elsewhere. I will post my photos on www.tremarctos.com when I have finished processing them.

We began our trip by flying into Tacna, Peru and taking a taxi to Arica; this was less expensive for both of us, and more convenient for me (I went to CICRA Los Amigos afterwards). In Arica, we picked up a Toyota 4Runner 4 × 4 at Hertz. As it turned out, a regular SUV would have been more than sufficient — all roads were well-maintained, and the stream crossings were easy. We split the afternoon between grocery shopping, Cuevas de Anzota (Marine Otters), and the Lluta River mouth (birds). Afterwards, we returned to Arica to search for one of our more difficult targets — bidones



Pampas Cat (*Leopardus colocolo colocolo*)

(fuel tanks). Hertz was out when we picked up the vehicle, as were the first five or so gas stations we stopped at. We eventually found a gas station with several 20 liter tanks, and purchased two of them. This was barely enough for six nights, and we had to purchase more in Putre on the way down.

Our accommodation in Putre was the comfortable and inexpensive Hostal Pachamama. We spent three nights there; two would have been sufficient for mammal-watching and acclimation, but we allocated more time for birds (Henry is a primarily a birder, and the avifauna of the high Andes is particularly nice IMO). We saw a few herds of Taruka on A149 above town (late afternoon/evening is best), but missed Guanaco. In retrospect, we should have spent more time searching in the cactus scrub below Putre .

After Putre, we headed to Guallatiri, our base to search for Andean Mountain Cat. The alojamiento there may be the closest accommodation to Surire (about a 45 minute drive, at speed). It was comfortable, but there was no hot water as far as we could tell. To reserve a room, call Vety Sanchez at 9 87844017 / 9 42483436. Meals are available at slightly limited hours (though you can ask for take-out lunches/dinners in advance). Camping is also possible at Polloquere hot springs 16km away from Surire. We contacted CONAF about staying at the refugio at Surire, but they said it was only for



Andean Mountain Cat (*Leopardus jacobita*)

park staff.

1 The Search for the Cat

To search for the Andean Mountain Cat, we first scouted areas with suitable habitat: steep, rocky areas with abundant Viscachas¹. While the cats have large home ranges, their prey is highly concentrated. We found two rock-covered ridges near Surire that seemed suitable — the traditional site behind the CONAF station and another ridge close by (GPS coordinates: -18.819359, -69.164859). Other rocky areas between Guallatiri and Surire held significantly fewer Viscachas. There are many other possible sites, including a rocky ridge northwest of Guallatiri along a side road (maybe a kilometer or two off the track), but we did not get close enough to ascertain the Viscacha density. We passed through Misitune, and did not see any suitable-looking habitat in the area.

Our strategy to search for the cat was to spotlight by foot in suitable habi-

¹References: “Ecological and biogeographical inferences on two sympatric and enigmatic Andean cat species using genetic identification of faecal samples” by Napolitano et al., and personal communications with Rodrigo Villalobos



Andean Mountain Cat, tail (*Leopardus jacobita*)

tat. Most of the rocky areas we located were too far from the road to spotlight from the vehicle (with the notable exception of the rocks immediately behind the CONAF station). On our first evening, we parked at (-18.807357,-69.167955) and slowly walked up and along the rocky ridge toward (-18.819359, -69.164859). We saw many Viscachas (which surprisingly sleep in the open), one small unidentified rodent, a Band-winged Nightjar, and an interesting frog that I will identify from photos. On the drive back, I spotlit two Culpeos.

The next evening, we searched the area behind the CONAF station for about two hours. When we returned to the vehicle, I shined my light behind the station and saw the eyes of a beautiful Andean Mountain Cat. It was eating a Viscacha. The cat looked around nervously, but not at us; I suspect it was on the lookout for another predator that might try to steal its kill (perhaps a Culpeo). We watched it for about 20 minutes, and it moved up and right several times before disappearing. On the drive back to Guallatiri, I spotlit a Pampas Cat sleeping in the open on another ridge (GPS coordinates -18.525079, -69.166187). We were able to approach it quite closely by foot. It was (of course) nice to see both cats in such a short time interval.

2 Return to Arica

We had arranged to spend three nights in Guallatiri, but departed early after our success on the second night. We returned to Arica via Putre, where we rested up before one more demanding excursion. On our last morning, we went on a seven hour boat trip in search of birds and mammals. Sperm Whale and Burmeister's Porpoise were possible, but the only mammals we saw were several small groups of Dolphins and a large colony of South American Sea Lions. We arranged the boat trip through Arica Turismo Aventura (aricaturismoaventura@gmail.com), which frequently runs fishing trips and tours of a breeding colony of Sea Lions, Humboldt Penguins, and other seabirds. The boat would have comfortably seated 6 passengers (plus the two crew members). It was surprisingly affordable, at 200,000 Chilean pesos for 6 hours plus 40,000 for each additional hour.

Contact information for Arica Turismo Aventura:

- Email: aricaturismoaventura@gmail.com
- Phone: +56 975 336 597 or +56 978 243 223
- Facebook: Aricaturismoaventura
- Instagram: arica_expedicionesnauticas

3 Mammal List

1. Mountain Viscacha (*Lagidium viscacia*) - locally abundant in Lauca and Surire
2. Pampas Cat (*Leopardus colocolo colocolo*) - one seen near Guallatiri
3. Andean Mountain Cat (*Leopardus jacobita*) - behind the CONAF station at Surire
4. Culpeo (*Lycalopex culpaeus*) - two seen while driving at night
5. South American Sea-lion (*Otaria byronia*) - abundant on boat trip
6. Marine Otter (*Lontra felina*) - a pair seen at Cuevas De Anzota, very close to the entrance. They repeatedly carried food to the same area on the shoreline, probably to a den. (Thanks for the site info, Jon!)

7. Dolphin sp - many seen on the boat trip. I may have identifiable photos.
8. Bat sp - a few seen flying at night outside of Arica
9. Vicuña (*Vicugna vicugna*) - abundant at higher elevations
10. Taruca - a few groups seen in the late afternoon/evening along A149 above Putre.

4 Species Missed

We missed Guanaco on the drive down from Putre, and did not spend much time looking for smaller rodents. I staked out a Tuco-tuco colony near Misitune for 30 minutes but did not see any activity except for several poorly-named James' Tree Iguanas (*Liolaemus jamesi*) in the burrows. South American Fur Seal can be seen 2.5 hours north of Arica, in Punta Coles, Peru (visible from shore, but a permit is apparently required).